

Research Brief

Differentiation

Question: What is differentiated instruction and how do you implement it?

Summary of Findings:

The idea of differentiation was initiated by educators of and researchers for students who were classified as gifted and talented. Subsequently, this concept has become part of the general belief system that educators must meet and address the needs of every child, regardless of ability levels. Researchers have found that most teachers state that in theory they believe in the idea of differentiation and want to do it. However, in light of high stakes standardized testing, large numbers of students, and large course loads, they feel it is an overwhelming task and there are not enough hours in the day to do it well.

The world is a different and rapidly changing place in comparison to that in which many current teachers were educated. Issues such as standards, socioeconomic diversity, multicultural issues, and new research on how people learn and integrate knowledge are all part of the environment for which students need to be prepared. According to Tomlinson, "Children seem to accept a world in which we are not alike. They do not quest for sameness, but they search for the sense of triumph that comes when they are respected, valued, nurtured, and even cajoled into accomplishing things they believed beyond their grasp" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 10).

Major Findings and Conclusions:

Definition:

According to Tomlinson, the guru in this field, differentiation is a philosophy, not a specific formula or methodology. It is the deep belief on the part of educators that every student can learn and the teachers will do whatever is necessary to help each reach his/her potential. There is a high regard and respect from the teacher to the learner. Although the teacher is the chief curriculum designer, in a differentiated environment, the students are the curriculum development engineers. In this setting, the content, processes, products, assessments, and environments can be differentiated.

- Content: The information the students need to know. It is based around standards, outcomes, expectations, and students' interests. What are the essential questions guiding the quest to conquer the content?
- Processes: How will the teacher pre-assess what the students already know? What methodologies and strategies will be utilized to provide ample opportunities for students to manipulate the content, then apply it to new situations?
- Products: These are authentic demonstrations of the knowledge gained and genuinely owned by the students. Assessment should be formal and informal and

done continuously. Processes can then be modified to help students continue their academic growth.

- Environment: The environment should be examined for conduciveness for learning and arranged for flexibility. Such things as furniture arrangement, how the space is utilized when there is group work and discussions, and where will displays of student work be placed, are a few of the considerations in this area.

Implementation:

In order for there to be buy-in by faculty, students, and parents, the literature provided several suggestions:

- Participation by the administration and teachers in long-term substantive training about differentiation should be done. It cannot be accomplished well with one or just a few inservices. Continue providing and attending training, especially while in the implementation and developmental stages.
- Educate the students, parents, superintendent, board of education, and community about the concept.
- Add differentiated assignments in incremental phases to one class and/or one concept, then gradually build up to doing more.
- Plan for differentiated activities, do not do more of the same.
- Encourage students to help design how the content could be taught.
- Open up alternative assignments for all students. Provide students choices about what type of work they would like to do to develop their knowledge of a concept.
- Find the students' interests and develop content and assignments around them.
- Develop support for teachers who are attempting to provide a differentiated program, where they have opportunities to talk and share openly.
- Set a realistic timeline for implementation, development, evaluation and revision. Allow adequate time for systemic change to occur.

A Few Suggested Differentiated Activities:

In a differentiated setting, students are not tracked by ability levels. They have opportunities to work with different groups and people depending on the intended outcome.

- Same skill groups: The teacher may work with a group brought together for the specific purpose of working on a given skill. When the skill has been taught and learned, the group is disbanded.
- Multilevel groups: Students may work together in developmental phases and provide feedback and support to each other.
- Tests: Students have different levels of skills and comfort when it comes to taking tests. Some students may need to have a test read to them, while other students may need to orally record their responses.
- Once criteria for a project has been determined and shared, the teacher can conference with students and allow them to determine how they will authentically demonstrate their knowledge while meeting the criteria.

- Utilize Gardner's eight multiple intelligences throughout the content presentation and process development. Teach students about how they learn and in what areas they need to grow.
- Use pre-assessments to find out what students know prior to beginning a unit. For those who have a strong background, guide them to delve deeper into the content.
- Portfolio assessments will provide opportunities for the students and teachers to describe and discuss the students' growth.

Online Resources:

On-line: Many of these are through the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Abstracts can be obtained, but copies of the articles must be purchased. There are two online addresses for many of these, one for the ERIC abstract and the other to access ASCD's site.

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2000, Winter). Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs
http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/ed_topics/cu2000win_willis.html
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2005) Education Topics: Differentiating Instruction
<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.b929745be54a98cbbfb3ffdb62108a0c/>

Articles:

- Page, S. W. (2000, September). When changes for the gifted spur differentiation of all. *Educational Leadership* 58 (1), 62-65.
This is a description of one school district in North Carolina that embarked on a program to differentiate
- Pettig, K. L. (2000, Sept). On the road to differentiated practice. *Educational Leadership*, 58 (1).
Steps to take toward differentiation are described in this article. Several ideas for some initial strategies are provided
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999, September). Mapping a route toward differentiated instruction. *Educational Leadership* 57 (1), 12-16.
This article explores ways in which to successfully implement differentiation.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2000, September). Reconcilable differences: Standards-based teaching and differentiation. *Educational Leadership* 58 (1), 6-11.

The importance of examining best teaching practices and how to align them with standards is described in this article. The author makes the point that differentiation can be done well in a standards driven environment.

Books:

- Gregory, G. H., and Chapman, C. (2002). *Differentiated instructional strategies*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Numerous suggestions and ideas for different differentiated strategies and methodologies are provided.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
This book describes how differentiation and the individualization of 30 years ago are different. It provides numerous differentiation strategies.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
A definition for differentiation is given. It examines the components of differentiation and provides suggestions for appropriate practices and strategies.

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